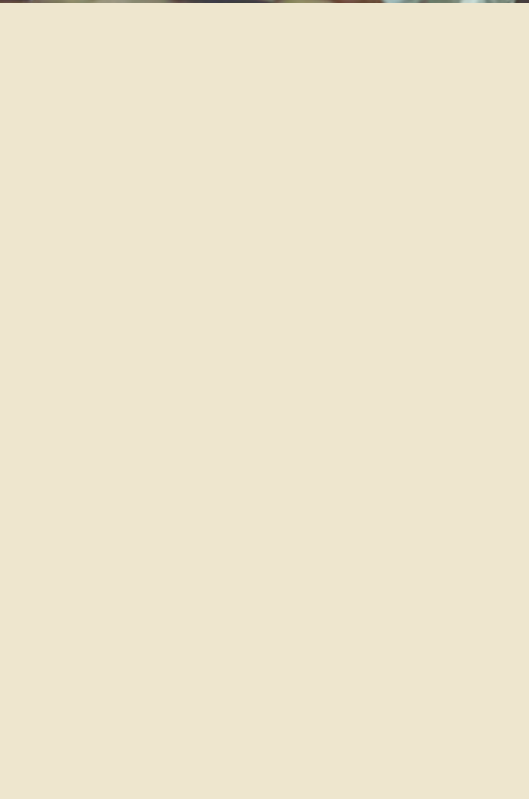




Developing home, school & community partnerships

A Working Paper

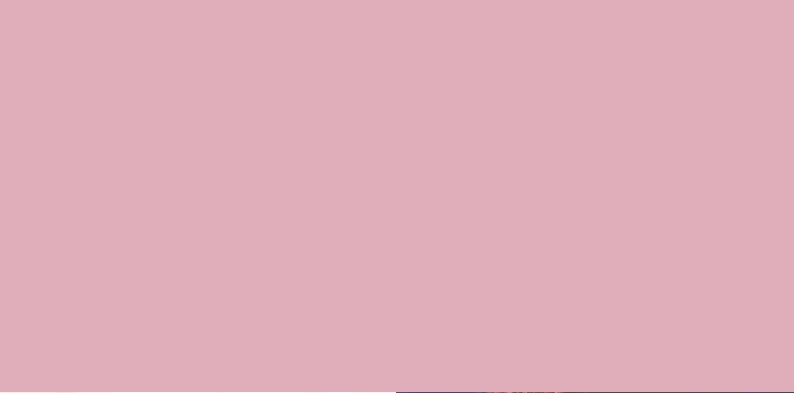


NSW Department of
Education and Training

Developing home, school and community partnerships



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Introduction

Developing home, school and community partnerships has been developed to support school communities participating in the NSW Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP).

This working paper should be used as a stimulus for school and community workshops around the issues, challenges and possible strategies for developing partnerships between home, school, the families they serve and their wider communities.

Using the paper in planning and development activities will assist principals, teachers, other staff, parents, students and other community members in:

- reviewing their current beliefs, attitudes and practices about school community partnerships
- increasing their knowledge of the impact of positive, constructive relationships between the home and school on students' educational outcomes
- increasing their mutual understandings of, and respect for, the roles of the home and school
- planning strategies and processes to address the issues and challenges to develop effective school community partnerships to support students' educational outcomes.

While the term parents is used throughout this paper, parents is intended to include all those family members who share responsibility for a child's education and wellbeing. The caregivers who play an important role in students' family lives may include grandparents, aunts, uncles, guardians, step-parents, older siblings and so on.



Social Justice Directions

The New South Wales Social Justice Directions Statement (2000) is based on four interrelated principles of equity, access, participation and rights. It includes a commitment to ensure that people have better opportunities for genuine participation and consultation about decisions that affect their lives.

The PSFP aims to improve educational outcomes for students from low socio-economic status (SES) communities. The program works to make outcomes more equitable across all schools. Literacy, numeracy and participation are the key focuses of the program because they are fundamental to success in all areas of learning. They are critical to enhancing the life chances of disadvantaged students and their communities.

The PSFP reflects the Government commitment to equity and strengthening communities in its guiding principles of *Fair Go, Fair Share, Fair Say and Fair Content*.



part one



What are home, school and community partnerships?

A partnership of the home, school and community is a relationship in which members of families, schools and communities develop mutual respect, understanding and ways of working together to improve students' learning outcomes.

It involves principals, teachers, other staff, parents, other community members and students in acknowledging and valuing each other's roles in contributing to students' success. It means the development of a learning community in which all participants respect the views of others and feel free to express differences of opinion and beliefs. It involves learning from each other and sharing in the celebration of achievements.

Developing partnerships between the home, school and community and encouraging parent participation in schooling are not ends in themselves. They are desirable because they have been shown to have a positive impact on students' learning outcomes.

There are two areas of research evidence over the last 20 years that show children benefit from family-school collaborations that provide parents with opportunities to shape their children's learning (Weiss, 2000).

First, there is evidence that parents' engagement with schooling generally enhances educational outcomes (Epstein 1995).

Second, there is a great deal of evidence that specific school-related programs for parents result in improvements in learning outcomes of the students (e.g. Cairney & Munsie 1992, Morrow & Paratore 1993).

For an extensive review of studies on the effects of parental engagement with schools on student achievement, see Delgado-Gaitin (1990).

Developing and maintaining partnerships among all members of the school community:

- leads to raised expectations and common goals among home, school and community
- builds mutual trust and confidence among all members of the school community
- provides a variety of learning opportunities and positive learning environments for all members of the school community
- reduces the number of difficulties faced as students go about their learning
- supports and promotes public education.



Involvement to partnerships ... a continuum

In discussions of home, school and community relationships, a continuum exists from 'parent involvement' to 'partnerships'.

Parent involvement is when the school keeps parents informed and parents play traditional volunteer roles at the school's request. Parents play an important role in school activities but do not usually help to make educational decisions.

Parent participation is when parents know what is happening at school and take part in educational decision making as well as more traditional volunteer activities. The school generally sets the limits of participation but it is the first step in building true partnerships.

Partnerships of home, school and community is a two-way process; a relationship based on mutual understanding and equality. It is when all partners share responsibility and obligations of decision making in appropriate ways.

The concept of partnerships of home, school and community should not be taken to mean that everyone involved in schooling must have the same attitudes, beliefs and goals. In any group of people, there will always be differences based on attitudes, beliefs and prior experiences. What is important is that differences are respected, common ground and common goals are identified and all partners have the opportunity to contribute.

Building bridges between home, school and community

School communities are diverse. They include people who have different personal, educational, social, cultural, linguistic and economic life experiences. There may be parents who have experienced very different educational settings to their children.

When the life experiences of the teachers and the families are similar, it may be relatively easy to build bridges between students' homes and schools. Where the life experiences of the teachers and the parents are very different, achieving partnerships between home, school and community may involve more of a conscious effort from all concerned.

Young people are not only school students. They are also engaged and involved on many other levels within their communities. They carry out a wide range of roles within their families.

Teachers can develop knowledge and understandings of the strengths and expectations of the families and communities as a crucial step in building bridges between home, school and communities.

Parents can develop understandings of the activities and practices of the school. They can learn about the new ways of teaching and learning. They can help the teachers and the school understand their children. Community members and agencies can help schools with extra resources and advice.



Teachers, parents, students and community members can work together to participate in and support the range of school activities as full partners. A school learning community can develop where everyone learns from everyone else, is actively engaged, values the contribution of the others and takes responsibility for their own growth.

What are home, school and community literacies?



Literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge are fundamental building blocks for success at school and in everyday and working life. The development of constructive school community partnerships will contribute to the improvement of students' literacy and numeracy. The research focus has been especially on literacy and concepts of home, school and community literacies are well developed. Similar arguments could be used for numeracy.

The concept of partnerships between home, school and community for literacy development is based on an approach to literacy that recognises that literacy is not a single skill or set of skills. Literacy is a range of social practices constructed by members of groups as they interact with, through and about language.

Literacy is learned in social contexts as people use literacy practices to interact with each other to achieve particular purposes. It occurs in a variety of situational contexts - in the home, in the community, at school, on the job, in recreational and other informal learning contexts.

Language and literacy are social and cultural practices that will change according to the social groups and contexts within which they are used. Members of different social, cultural and linguistic groups use language and literacy in different ways. They may have different experiences with print and about print. They use their literacy skills in different ways to achieve their purposes.

Students benefit from help to bridge the differences between home, school and community literacies. School literacy practices emphasise the development of literacy skills, whereas home literacy practices tend to be embedded in everyday activities (Cairney & Ruge 1998; Heath, 1983).

The literacy practices that are constructed among members of a family group in home contexts can be called 'home literacies' or 'family literacies'.

Examples of home literacy practices include:

- reading for pleasure in books and magazines, playing board games and computer games and using the Internet
- maintaining relationships, such as writing cards for family members and friends, writing e-mails and making phone calls
- daily family interactions, such as conversations and instructions to do things
- following instructions, such as cooking recipes, manuals for household equipment



- gaining information, such as reading a newspaper, checking a TV guide, shopping catalogues and advertisements
- viewing and commenting on TV programs and videos, listening to radio programs, including news and commercials
- communicating with institutions and government departments, such as writing a letter of complaint and reading bank statements
- using languages other than standard Australian English.

‘School literacies’ refer to the particular types and uses of literacy that are commonly developed and valued in schools. They apply to both teachers and students. Succeeding at ‘school literacy practices’ involves learning the spoken and written codes of schooling in all key learning areas. Students cannot achieve educational success without succeeding at school literacy practices.

Examples of school literacy practices for students include:

- learning to read and write in formal ways
- presenting information, such as writing explanations and discussions, newsletters, sports lists, making graphs or charts and creating visual images
- giving news, brainstorming, taking turns speaking, debating, listening to instructions, asking questions, giving opinions and delivering presentations
- participating in school assemblies, school community functions and ceremonies
- interpreting and analysing information, reading novels, taking notes from factual texts and identifying bias in web pages
- taking an active role in student representative councils or student working committees, running meetings, taking minutes, lobbying and writing reports
- doing homework, tests and assessment tasks
- reading and responding to school newsletters and questionnaires, writing absence notes, commenting on school reports and student work.

The literacy practices that are constructed through the interactions of members of groups in community contexts can be called ‘community literacies’.

Examples of community literacy practices include:

- using and valuing Aboriginal English and languages other than English
- reading train or bus timetables, giving directions to others
- peer group activities, playing arcade games, going to the movies
- reading signs, symbols and logos in streets and shopping centres
- searching for information in local libraries and Internet cafes
- supporting community organisations, letters and articles in local papers
- organised sport registrations, record-keeping, match reports, club newsletters, discussion and interpretation of rules and coaching techniques
- story telling and making speeches at community events
- sharing historical details, life stories and kinship ties to maintain the cultural identity of specific groups
- religious group activities, reading religious texts, writing newsletters and discussing and interpreting the groups’ stance on particular issues.

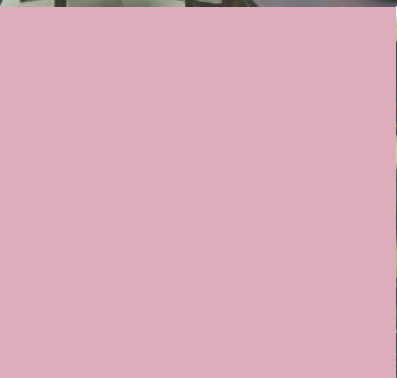
Some insights from research

- Incorporating family and community literacy into the school implies willingness to negotiate on the part of all parties involved. Students do better under these types of co-operative arrangements and there seems to be almost universal support for the importance of literacy (Bull and Ansley, 1996).
- Home factors play an important role in literacy development (Handel 1992; Heath 1983; Morrow & Paratore 1993).
- Children and adults within the home or family setting interact quite differently and for different purposes than students and teachers do at school (Freebody 1997).
- Home literacy practices differ markedly across families (Breen et al. 1994; Cairney & Ruge 1998; Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn 1995; Heath 1983; Snow et al. 1991).
- Many families engage in literacy practices that are unlike those encountered in schools (Breen et al. 1994; Cairney & Ruge 1998).
- The home offers more varied and distinctive literacy roles for children than the school classroom (Freebody 1997).
- Literacy-related interactions between children of different ages are far more common in homes than in school contexts (Cairney et al. 1995; Cairney & Ruge 1998).
- There is much greater emphasis on reading than writing in most homes (Cairney & Ruge 1998).
- Parents and teachers often have very different notions of what constitutes 'school success' (Cairney & Ruge 1998).
- Teachers often interpret students' literacy achievement according to their socio-economic status and home backgrounds rather than from hard evidence (Freebody, Gunn, and Forrest 1995).
- Parents often feel disempowered by the differences between home and school in understandings about teaching and learning practices (Freebody, Gunn, and Forrest 1995).
- Schools often emphasise what families and parents can learn from school and pay little attention to what schools can learn from families (Breen et al. 1994; Morrow & Paratore 1993).
- Children's home literacy practices tend to remain within the child's control, whereas school literacy practices are far more within the teacher's control (Cairney & Ruge 1998).
- The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to create a home environment which encourages learning, communicate high yet reasonable expectations for their children's achievement and future careers and become involved in their children's education at school and in the community (Henderson and Berla, 1995).





part two



Supporting home, school and community partnerships

Seven strands have been identified in supporting school community partnerships. They are based on Epstein's framework of parental engagement.

They are:

1. Communication among home, school and community
2. School and classroom practices
3. Parents helping their children to learn
4. The role of students in linking home and school
5. Parents as volunteers
6. Parents learning about children's learning
7. Working with the community.



Using the strands to support school community partnerships

Each strand is presented separately in this paper. In practice all of the strands interact in many ways. Changing practices in any one strand will necessarily influence some or all of the other strands.

Discussion points and opportunities for action are listed under the seven strands. School communities could use the discussion points to examine their current beliefs and practices. The opportunities for action suggest ways to work towards more effective partnerships to improve student learning outcomes.

The opportunities for action are not in any priority order. Action should take account of the strengths of the school community and where it is on the continuum towards partnerships of home, school and the community.

Support for schools in developing community partnerships

The Department of Education and Training helps schools build links with the community through a range of community development and support positions. These include PSFP Community Development Officers, school-based Community Liaison Officers, Aboriginal Education Assistants, Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers and Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) Community Information Officers.

Communication among home, school and community

One

Effective two-way communication among home, school and community contributes to improved student achievement, increased parental participation in children's learning and enhanced parent, community and student perceptions of teachers and schools.

Communication among home, school and community should be regular, two-way and meaningful using a variety of written, oral and visual ways to communicate.

Communication strategies should be flexible to meet the needs of all involved. There are many different communication styles. Some people prefer to speak with just one or two others while others are happy to be part of a large group. Some people enjoy reading, some like e-mail, others prefer to speak face to face or on the telephone. Some people respond to visual communication while others have highly developed listening skills.

Some parents and community members may need the support of translators or interpreters. They may or may not be literate in their home language. Schools should provide opportunities for teachers to learn about and develop understandings of local strengths, community and family literacies and effective communication styles.

Sometimes when schools' attempts to communicate with parents are not successful, teachers may incorrectly assume parents are not interested in their children's schooling. At the same time, some parents may believe that they do not have the right to initiate communication with the school or that 'no news is good news'.

Parents and teachers should create times and places for discussion about school, education and students' learning. This should include regular, comprehensive and meaningful reporting of students' progress and achievements to parents and opportunities to receive feedback from parents. Parents are their child's first teachers and can give great insight into a student's skills, knowledge and attributes.

Starting points for discussion

- Do communication strategies make it clear what the teachers and parents need tell each other and to find out?
- What strategies are in place for communication with those families who are not able to come to the school site or who have language or cultural differences?
- How does the school organise time for teachers and parents to talk about their expectations for students' learning?
- What strategies for two-way feedback are incorporated into homework activities and assessment and reporting procedures?
- In what ways can parents inform teachers about their children's home experiences and literacy activities?



- How can teachers inform all parents about school literacy activities?
- How can parents and teachers work together to help the broader community find out about what is happening in the school?
- What interagency protocols has the school community developed to ensure respectful information sharing, decision making and referral procedures? (e.g. health, community services, youth services, child protection, work experience).

Some opportunities for action

- Teachers and parents use home visits, classroom visits, school-gate meetings, phone calls and e-mails to communicate information about literacy activities.
- School communities use community radio, television and newspapers to communicate with families, especially in areas where a large proportion of parents speak a language other than English.
- Teachers make at least two positive phone calls to parents each week.
- Schools hold meetings with parents outside the school where parents may feel more comfortable. Possible venues include child care centres, neighbourhood centres, council meeting rooms, church halls, local clubs and open air venues.
- School communities hold a meeting each term to discuss issues that are important to all members. These meetings can be facilitated by an interagency partner to enable everyone to express their views and expectations. Interpreters and translators should be included to assist everyone's understanding.
- Schools are creative about using key local community members to pass school information into the community. Use Departmental community officers and community leaders to speak with families. Use sites such as doctors' surgeries, shopping centres and hairdressers to display posters and newsletters.
- Community organisations include information about the school in their newsletters and display information on noticeboards. Reply slips and contact numbers can be provided to allow for feedback.
- School communities provide input for training school staff in answering the telephone in ways that are respectful, friendly and encourage two-way communication.
- Teachers and school leaders listen to the views of students and parents through regular surveys.



Communication among home, school and community should be regular, two-way and meaningful using a variety of written, oral and visual ways to communicate.

School and classroom practices

two

School and classroom practices impact significantly on students' experiences of, and engagement with, schooling. These practices affect the quality of the interrelationships between people, policies and learning programs. They should be based on social justice and equity principles summarised as a fair go, fair share, fair say and fair content.

In low SES schools, the context of socio-economic disadvantage needs to be understood, particularly in the ways it relates to other contextual factors such as gender, age, Aboriginality, cultural background, refugee status, disability, geographical location, non-English speaking background and personal life experiences.

Understanding these different contexts is critical to developing and sustaining positive student-teacher and home-school relationships. Parents also benefit from understanding how and why classrooms and the school are organised in the ways they are.

Physical environments should be welcoming and appealing. Front-line staff should be friendly and helpful. The layout and decoration of the foyer, waiting areas, classrooms and open spaces can contribute to pride in, and engagement with, the school. These are ideal arenas for the display of material produced by the students, community information and school information.

School and classroom practices should acknowledge and build on the learning styles and literacy experiences that students use in their homes and community activities. Teachers should use a variety of texts and activities from home and the wider community.

School and classroom practices should encourage and support the participation of teachers, parents, students and members of the wider school community. This includes involving English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, Support Teachers Learning Difficulties (STLD), Aboriginal Education Assistants, parents and community members in teaching and learning activities.



Starting points for discussion

- How are positive relationships based on social justice and equity principles developed across the whole school community?
- What school and community strategies exist to ensure that the school site is a warm and welcoming environment that reflects the nature of its community?
- How can good practices be organised and extended so that they may be used by all teachers in the school?
- What opportunities are provided for parents and teachers to participate in collaborative decision making about students' education? How are parents assisted in this process?
- How are students, teachers, parents and community members supported in working productively with others who may have different views and opinions?
- In what ways are students' learning styles and home literacy experiences currently reflected in school and classroom practices?
- How do school and classroom practices reinforce high expectations of students to teachers, parents and community members?
- In what ways can classrooms be organised so that parents and teachers work together in class and through activities such as planned homework?



Some opportunities for action

- Community members and parents support the school in developing a comprehensive school community profile.
- Students, parents and teachers collaborate in a project to create attractive public areas and develop strategies for welcoming visitors to the school.
- Teachers have regular mentoring opportunities for swapping strategies and ideas that work and for professional discussions about curriculum and learning.
- Community members and teachers collaborate to provide information and resources to help parents effectively support students' learning.
- Students, teachers and community members work together on action research into effective school organisation, teaching, learning and participation.
- Student leaders, teachers and parents are actively involved in school councils, whole-school planning and professional learning teams.
- Parents and teachers collaborate to develop meaningful, planned homework practices for students that build on home literacy practices and involve parents.
- School communities involve Aboriginal education committees in planning and implementing Aboriginal studies and education programs.
- Staff meetings include time for teachers to discuss the nature of the school community in positive ways.



Parents helping their children to learn

three

Parents are their child's first teacher (Rahima Baldwin Dancy, 1989). Families support children's learning at home, at school, at language classes, in social situations, within family activities and at sporting and creative events. The support they give may be in ways different to those traditionally valued and reinforced by schools.

Parents and teachers should have the chance to share information and learn from one another about supporting children's learning at home and at school. They need to understand and value the roles that each plays. Teachers and parents should recognise the valuable support that parents can provide to their children and the crucial role that parents have in producing positive educational outcomes for their children.

Parents own experiences of schooling and their expectations of their children may influence their ability or confidence to become closely involved with their child's learning at school. This may also be affected by language or cultural issues and access to resources. Nonetheless, most parents can, and do, assist their own children at home.

The support parents have traditionally given through helping their children with homework is a major element of parental support for teaching and learning. Teachers and schools should continue to develop and maintain effective and engaging ways of building on the support that parents give for their child's learning at home.

All members of the school community should recognise that the ways in which parents provide support for their children's learning may change over time. This may be due to such issues as the age and place of the child within the family, the child's growing independence and the time demands of family and employment.

Starting points for discussion

- How can teachers and parents best work together to help children learn?
- What can the school community do to assist all families to help their children to learn?
- What resources are available to parents that can assist them to help their children to learn?
- How does the school identify and build on all the forms of support provided by families?
- What are the ways parents support their own child's learning at home and at school?
- What ways do parents support their children in school activities?
- How can homework strategies be best used to enhance home-school partnerships and assist parents in helping their children to learn?



Some opportunities for action

- Parents are trained in how to help their children at home with school work.
- School communities involve community agencies in workshops for parents related to child development, parenting and learning. Workshops build on parents' skills and knowledge and assist with new ideas about helping their child at home and in the classroom.
- Teachers and community officers provide regular information to multicultural media services that promotes community understandings about education and learning.
- Early in the school year parents and teachers workshop a set of guidelines for homework activities. Teachers find out what they can do to help parents to support their children's learning at home.
- Homework sheets contain a brief outline of the expected outcomes of the tasks. Homework sheets include opportunities for feedback from parents and students.
- Schools open the library or computer room for afternoon or evening homework sessions where parents can assist their children and gain support from teachers if necessary.
- Parents are included in decision making about education programs for their children.
- Community officers facilitate regular meetings between teachers and parents to explore current teaching and learning activities. Meetings are held at times convenient to parents with work and family commitments.
- Teachers and parents use school facilities to workshop the changing nature of literacy practices using technology.
- Parents and teachers meet to review assessments and testing programs such as Basic Skills Test (BST) and English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) and to take jointly planned actions to improve students' literacy and numeracy.
- School communities include community agencies like early childhood centres and family support services in orientation to school activities such as play group and parents group sessions.
- Feeder primary schools and high schools collaborate with community-based family and youth services to identify local issues and develop strategies to facilitate smooth transition from primary school to high school for both parents and students.



The role of students in linking home and school

four

Students are the reason for the interaction among the home, school and community. They are the carriers and interpreters of attitudes and expectations between home, school and community.

School communities should understand that cultural issues, including gender and levels of responsibility or autonomy, can sometimes impact on the role of students in linking home and school.

Young people often have roles of trust and responsibility within their family life that are not reflected in the roles that schools allow them to hold. Within the home and family they have opportunities for decision making and contribute to relationships. They have a position in the family with responsibilities and privileges that go with that position. School practices should recognise and build on students' capacities and experience.

Students bring together the literacies of the home, school and community. They bring the products of literacy activities, such as stories, drawings, books and computer-generated materials into the school context. They carry messages and written information between home and school. Other important links are through homework activities, children talking with family members about school and children 'playing schools' (Cairney & Ruge 1998).

The important role that students play in linking home and school should be made explicit to parents, teachers and to students themselves. Teachers and parents should acknowledge and support the role of students in the development of effective partnerships between home and school.

Messages that go from school to student to parent, and require each to respond to the other, give two-way opportunities for learning to take place (Farris, Hansell Howe and Fuhler 1995).

School policies and practices should acknowledge that the role of students in linking home and school can change over time and can be influenced by the individual's level of responsibility, attitudes toward school, home, family and peer pressure. Students in the middle or secondary years may be less comfortable to be an active conduit between home and school. They may influence the communication between home and school when they forget to deliver messages and notes or discourage their parents from visiting the school or talking to their teachers.

Teachers and parents should encourage students to value their role as a link between home and school. The benefits and influence that this role can have on themselves, their families and the school are important.



Starting points for discussion

- What attitudes, beliefs and assumptions do teachers, parents and students currently hold about the role of students in linking home and school?
- How is the role of students in developing effective partnerships between home and school currently acknowledged and supported by all members of the school community?
- What information is shared between school and home via students?
- What structures and models can be developed to support this role?
- What role do students currently play linking their schools and the community?
- How can students themselves understand the ways in which they can contribute to effective relationships and why this is important?
- How are students supported in taking responsible roles within the school?
- How is the students' role in communicating between home and school encouraged and facilitated?



Some opportunities for action

- Schools, parents and community youth organisations explore students' expectations and views through surveys and group discussions.
- Students create posters promoting the role of students in linking home and school for display in the school and community.
- Students make a video about the role of students in linking home and school for viewing at home and at school.
- Students interview parents using structured formats to gather their views on key issues such as curriculum changes, proposed changes to school buildings or grounds and ways of reporting on student activities and achievements.
- Parents, teachers, students and community members plan performances and exhibitions to showcase or celebrate school, home and community literacies and cultural practices.
- Students from middle primary to secondary years work as co-researchers with teachers and parents, documenting their own and their families' home literacy practices through the use of diaries and interviews.
- Schools provide space and opportunities for displays and information to showcase students' and parents' involvement in community events.
- Students compose and send email messages to parents and teachers about important school events.
- Teachers, students and parents engage in three-way conferencing on samples of students' own work.
- Students receive an 'incentive' for returning parent acknowledgement slips.
- Students record important messages in a personal school diary.

Parents as volunteers

five

Parent volunteers in schools may well be the largest volunteer group in society. The contribution of parents through fundraising and practical support in the school and classroom has traditionally supported the activities of schools. It continues to be vitally important.

Volunteering allows parents and community members to make a contribution to the school community. Volunteers build on and develop skills and create links and relationships. The contributions of individual members strengthen the community as a whole. For students, volunteers in schools actively model the benefits of volunteering.

Teachers benefit from volunteers' participation in schools. They gain valuable assistance and knowledge of the school community that supports them in their attempts to improve students' learning outcomes. Students benefit from additional instructional time, support or resources. Parents gain valuable knowledge about school programs and practices, including school literacy. Parents and community members who volunteer in schools tend to have higher regard for the work that teachers do. This increased understanding contributes to more effective partnerships between home and school.

Traditionally, parent volunteers have undertaken tasks such as working in the school canteen, working bees, covering books, sports supervision, socials, fund raising and the activities of parents and citizens' associations. Increasingly, parent volunteers are also working on teaching and learning tasks in classrooms.

Volunteers should do meaningful activities that build on their own interests, abilities and strengths. Parents who are unable to volunteer during school hours may appreciate an alternative range of options in which they can take part. Volunteers should be given clear evidence that their efforts make a difference to students' learning outcomes and quality of school life.

Parent volunteer programs may vary in their effectiveness over time. Sometimes key motivating individuals move on. The nature of community and individual strengths change. Schools can do much to support and energise the volunteers.

The organisation and culture of the classroom and school should support volunteering through clear policies, training programs, activities to celebrate volunteers' efforts and flexible opportunities for volunteering in many different ways.

Volunteer programs should be organised on a school-wide basis with appropriate support, communication and resourcing strategies.

Teachers benefit from volunteers' participation in schools. They gain valuable assistance and knowledge of the school community that supports them in their attempts to improve students' learning outcomes. Students benefit from additional instructional time, support or resources.

Starting points for discussion

- In what ways do parents and community members currently volunteer in school activities?
- How does the school community recognise and support volunteers?
- What are the range of ways volunteers can contribute to teaching and learning?
- How does the school find out what skills or talents parents and community members have that could be available to support the school?
- What do teachers, students and parents gain from parents and community members volunteering in school activities?
- How can volunteer programs be extended to activities that can be done at home or within the community?

Some opportunities for action

- Schools develop opportunities for volunteering based on information gained from surveying parents and community members about their interests, talents and availability for volunteering in the school.
- Schools seek volunteers from local interest groups such as dance groups, musical societies, amateur and professional theatre groups, gardening clubs, historical societies and art and crafts groups.
- School communities develop a volunteer policy which covers the rights and responsibilities of the school and the volunteer.
- Parents and community members approach the school to offer their assistance. Parents, community members and teachers work together to identify activities or programs where assistance is needed.
- School communities provide training for volunteers that includes English language learning to support parents from language backgrounds other than English in their participation in school and classroom activities.
- Training programs for volunteers cover roles and responsibilities, effective communication with children and young people and school policies and protocols (e.g. relating to confidentiality or child protection).
- Teachers enlist the support of community members in volunteer and mentor programs to enhance students' learning.
- Schools provide opportunities for parents to move from basic volunteer roles into higher levels of responsibility and even employment.



Parents learning about children's learning

six

Information and education programs that assist parents to learn about students' learning can help them to support their child's learning at home and at school. They are an integral part of the school community's planned strategies to improve students' education outcomes.

Parents' capacity to understand how children learn and to help them can be increased by parent training programs.

Effective programs build on existing knowledge and skills. They give opportunities for adults to learn from one another and to learn together. They are culturally appropriate and accessible. They may involve community organisations in the planning and implementation of the program. Activities may include face-to-face discussion, learning circles, and peer support programs. There are kits, brochures, programs and videos on ways to support literacy at home produced by the Department and other educational and parenting support organisations.

Local programs that build on local strengths can be developed in collaboration with the school community. Parents, teachers and community members should work together to provide a range of initiatives or programs in school and community contexts. Parents' work, family and childcare commitments should be considered when planning the time and location of parent information and education programs. Running programs in English only may prevent parents from language backgrounds other than English from participating.

Programs are most successful when they provide something that parents feel they need. The purpose of any parent education and information initiative should be clearly outlined to everyone involved. Programs may offer information to all parents in the school community or be targeted to a specific group of parents who may benefit most from specialised information, for example, newly arrived migrants or parents of students entering Year 7. All programs should explicitly recognise and respect the knowledge and experience that parents have.



Starting points for discussion

- How does the school community find out what would help parents?
- How does the school community recognise and build on parents' existing knowledge and skills in supporting their children's learning?
- How can the parents, students and the school benefit from parent information and education programs?
- How can parents and teachers develop understandings about home literacies and school literacies through parent information and education programs?
- What are the best ways for parents and teachers to work together to increase parents' knowledge of school literacy practices and effective forms of literacy support?
- How can program packages be adapted to cater for a particular group of parents in the school community?



Some opportunities for action

- Parents, schools and other community agencies collaborate to develop a series of parent information and education strategies for the year. These may include workshops, presentations, discussion groups, information fairs, videos and pamphlets. They could cover a range of issues that parents identify as important for helping students to learn.
- Teachers and parents review available parent information and education packages to select and adapt suitable programs. The NSW Board of Studies has published a range of parent information. PSFP community development officers and community organisations can advise on appropriate programs developed for socio-economically disadvantaged communities.
- School communities develop activities to build on their specific strengths. A skilled facilitator could assist the group to identify its strengths and the best ways these could be used to improve student outcomes. A successful program could be written up as a resource for other school communities.
- School communities use bilingual or community language teachers, community liaison officers and community organisations to offer parent education programs and activities in languages other than English.
- Community transport groups help parents who have difficulty getting to the venue. Some communities have access to low-cost child care. Schools can check with their local council about this service.
- Teachers provide parents with brief explanations to support homework activities. Parent feedback sections can be included.
- Schools use three-way conferencing on students' work to help parents learn about their child's learning.
- Schools send home a three-minute video of the teacher working with the student. An explanation of what is happening and why should be included.

Working with the community

seven

The impacts of social and economic challenges facing many communities make it increasingly important that schools play a part as essential community resources. At the same time, schools and teachers cannot address these complex challenges by themselves. They need to work with other agencies that have responsibility within the community.

Working in an interagency approach requires schools to know their community, to use their community and to build their community.

Knowing the community is about identifying its characteristics and understanding the issues of concern to it.

Using the community is about drawing on the resources available to support the school. It requires a culture of openness, transparency of decision making and sharing of information and resources.

Building your community is about enhancing networks and social capacity. The school is a key player in creating and maintaining an effective and vigorous learning community.

The Strengthening Communities Unit in the Premier's Department manages initiatives that often affect schools. The unit's main role is to lead and facilitate whole-of-government projects that enable government agencies and communities to work together to build skills, strengthen community capacity and plan and deliver integrated, effective services.

The evaluation of the Full Service Schools (FSS) program (DETYA, 2001) showed that the FSS helped students at risk to re-engage with schooling and vocational education and training (VET). The FSS developed networks between local schools, TAFE colleges, private VET providers, public and private youth services, other community organisations, parents and students. These networks were found to be more effective in meeting individual student's needs than any one agency operating in isolation.

Other successful community collaboration programs include Links to Learning community grants, the TAFE NSW *Helping Young People at Risk* and mentoring programs using community members, such as Plan-It Youth that has been developed with the Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

Working with community agencies involves using local knowledge to find solutions to local problems. All of the resources available in the community should be used to strengthen schools and families and enhance student learning outcomes.

Starting points for discussion

- What are the key characteristics and strengths of the community?
- What school activities could be supported by collaboration with other government departments, community groups or agencies?
- What interagency partnerships could support areas such as drug education, anti-bullying and social development in the school?



- How does the school encourage community support for the school?
- What does the community, including local employers, expect from schools and students? How can they assist students' learning?
- How should the school go about sharing information or working with other agencies and organisations?
- How does the school access and use information about developments in agencies that have close connections with students e.g. youth health services, community-based youth centres, students at risk programs and child protection agencies?
- What local organisations and businesses could provide support to the school? What can the school offer to the community?

Some opportunities for action

- Work with other local school communities and district office to develop a community profile that maps and creates a register of the groups and the services available in the community.
- Parents, teachers, students and local media produce a regular flyer, newspaper column or radio segment to share information about the school and its activities with the broader community.
- Teachers and youth workers collaborate to provide out-of-school hours homework support at the local youth centre.
- Youth workers contribute expertise on engaging young people in literacy and social development programs in the school and community venues.
- Community organisations such as Red Cross provide breakfast programs in the school.
- Youth health services work with teachers to co-deliver suicide prevention, pre-parenting, drug education and mental health programs in the school and in community venues.
- The school community applies for funding for improvement projects through schemes such as the Commonwealth Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, the Area Assistance Scheme, NSW Department of Community Services, Area Health Services and Families First.
- Schools collaborate with other agencies to offer literacy programs for students, parents and community members. Such agencies might include Technical and Further Education NSW (TAFE NSW), Adult Migrant English Service (AMES), Adult and Community Education (ACE), migrant resource centres, tertiary institutions, youth organisations and community education colleges.
- Primary and secondary schools offer mentor programs via links with high profile local identities, business leaders and staff in human service organisations to provide vocational models for students.
- Schools build on the Schools as Community Centres Program.
- Set up a community mentoring program for students of any age at risk of disengaging from education and training.



Reflection and planning matrix

A reflection and planning matrix is included. This matrix can be used as a guide to assist school communities to reflect on the level of home, school and community partnerships that they have achieved and to plan for continued development in this area.

The reflection and planning matrix illustrates the progression towards the partnership of home, school and communities. It is based on the seven strands that have been discussed in this paper. It describes indicators for school communities of three levels in the progression towards partnerships.

The matrix can be used in conjunction with the starting points for discussion and the opportunities for action to stimulate action.

School communities should ask:

- Where are we along the continuum?
- Which areas should we address?
- How will this be best done for our particular community? Who can help us?
- How will we know when we are doing well?
- How can we share our knowledge about this with others?



Reflection and planning matrix

LEVELS	Strands in School Community Partnerships						
	Communication among home, school and community	School and classroom practices	Parents helping their children to learn	The role of students in linking home and school	Parents as Volunteers	Parents learning about children's learning	Working with the community
Partnership Level 3	Multiple two-way modes of communication used. Translators and interpreters are used. All jargon and technical terms are explained. Parents and community express ideas on full range of issues relating to schooling.	Teaching is socially and culturally responsive. Home and community literacy practices are integral to school literacy practices. Parents are encouraged to be in the school. They are active in school and classroom decision making.	Parents and teachers have common goals and high expectations. School recognises and builds on all the ways in which parents support student learning. Parents support learning at school and home in many different ways. School and community workshops provide parents with information and skills.	Students and parents discuss school issues. Students understand their role in linking home and school. Students are active in decision making at all levels. Parents understand the role of students in linking home and school.	Volunteering is celebrated and supported. Parent and community volunteers are present in the full range of school activities. Parents bring culturally based models of literacy practices into the school. Many different ways to volunteer exist.	Parents, teachers and community learn together about students' learning in school and community contexts. Parents are part of the learning community of the school. Parents take part in a range of parent education activities.	School knows its community resources. Whole school community actively contributes to enhanced student learning outcomes. School seeks opportunities for local industry, educational and community links. School uses interagency approaches to support students and families.
Participation Level 2	Limited opportunities for teacher parent interaction. Communication is mostly school initiated. Parents contribute to newsletter.	School makes some attempts to incorporate home experiences in school practices. Some parents feel welcomed at school.	Most parents engage in a number of school initiated forms of support.	Parents and teachers receive information carried by students from home and school.	School provides some training for parents in activities such as reading helpers.	School offers parent education activities in response to identified need and parent requests.	School actively seeks to take part in significant community events. School enlists the support of community in volunteer and mentor programs and at crisis times.
Involvement Level 1	Mainly one-way communication from school in newsletters or notes to parents. Parent notes as required by school.	Practices are teacher orientated. Relations with parents are limited and formal.	Parents are expected to take responsibility for their children without school support.	Low proportion of school messages are delivered to parents by students. Teachers do not learn about families from students.	Parents undertake fundraising, canteen, sport, working bees.	Parents have limited understanding of children's learning from ad hoc observation.	School may contribute to community activities when approached. School displays students' work in the community.

Conclusion

How one school moved towards partnerships with families

We believed that families had important knowledge to add to ours ... We respected what was offered and celebrated it with their children.

In developing our partnerships with families, we were not trying to impose our vision of literacy but to develop relationships with families where we could learn about what already existed in the families and connect that with the literacy classroom community. We were trying to learn from parents what literacy events were important in their lives and share with them the important literacy events in their children's school ... Respect and belief in family knowledge and caring are our core values; we based partnership decisions and actions on these values.

We believed that families had important knowledge to add to ours ... We respected what was offered and celebrated it with their children.

We believed parents cared and we offered a way to re-enter schooling without requiring they be physically present for a roll call of good parents.

We respected what they offered and thanked them often for the time and effort they shared with us and their children.

They, in turn, treated us with respect and thanked us on behalf of their children. These elements of trust, shared goals, and genuine dialogue on a regular basis were critical to each child's supported growth.

Shockley et al. (1995).

The level of a partnership may be different at different times because of the changing nature of families, schools and communities. There may be times when school communities are in 'maintenance' mode because partnerships between home, school and community are working well. At other times there may be a need to be more proactive in building these partnerships. There is no end point of partnership.

Mutual trust, shared goals and genuine, regular dialogues are at the heart of these effective partnerships. Family, school and community contexts overlap and interact with one another on many levels. The experiences that influence students in one context also influence the students in other contexts. There is greater likelihood of successful student educational outcomes when the values and expectations are understood and reflected in each context. Research clearly demonstrates that developing effective partnerships will assist schools to improve the learning outcomes of their students.

The challenge for Priority Schools Funding Program school communities is to make partnerships between the home, school and community a key strategy in improving the educational outcomes of socio-economically disadvantaged students and their communities.



Journal articles listed in the references are available from the State Equity Centre. The State Equity Centre can be contacted on telephone (02) 9582 5860, fax (02) 9550 2874 or e-mail equity@ozemail.com.au.

Books listed in the references are available from the Education and Training Information Service (ETIS) in Strathfield. The ETIS can be contacted on telephone (02) 9715 8298, fax (02) 9715 8292 or e-mail etis.strathfield@tafensw.edu.au.

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GENERAL

There are many magazines, books, pamphlets and videos that address the issue of family relationships, parenting and child development. Many of these refer to the relationship between home and school. These may be available from reputable book stores and early childhood resource suppliers.

Family Support Services of NSW has a range of resources that are particularly applicable to disadvantaged communities.

Contact: 2 Wunda Cres, Concord West NSW 2138, Tel: (02) 9743 6565

LITERACY

The following parent resources are available for schools to inform parents about literacy development.

Pamphlets

- Board of Studies NSW (1999), *Credentiailling for Students with Special Education Needs*, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney.
- Board of Studies NSW (1996), *Supporting Your Child's Learning: Reading in K-6*, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney.
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- NSW Department of Education and Training, *Helping your child with Literacy in Years 5-8*, NSW Department of Education and Training, Sydney.
- NSW Department of Education and Training, *Learning Partnerships - Going to school: Walking together, Growing together, Learning together*, NSW Department of Education and Training, Sydney.
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Handbooks

- Public Relations Directorate (1999) NSW Department of Education and Training, *1999 Parents' Guide to Schools*, NSW Department of Education and Training, Sydney.
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School community information and Parent education resources

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- NSW Department of School Education (1985) *The Sausage Sizzle and Beyond. Inservice Education and the DSP*. Metropolitan East Region. NSW Department of School Education.

Magazines

- NSW Department of Community Services produces a series of parent information magazines. Contact DoCS Central Office on telephone (02) 9716 2222 to request copies of these parenting resources.

